"We need a census of the fauna and flora that extends beyond the vertebrates and flowering plants to the teeming populations of smaller organisms ... from insects to fungi and eventually microbes.... Any one of those species ... could be a keystone species."

Edward O. Wilson, Discovery 2000 Conference

Taking Stock of Biodiversity

NPS PHOTO BY MICHAEL WILDERMAN

Funded by the Natural Resource Challenge, vascular plant surveys at Thomas Stone National Historic Site brought to light rich biodiversity in 2001 and 2002. Resource specialists with the National Park Service documented 375 plant species in the small historical park, including many that are listed as rare or newly recorded in Maryland. (The image depicts NPS Biologist Brent Steury conducting a vascular plant survey in Anacostia Park, Washington, D.C.)

The National Park Service is beginning to take stock of the biological diversity—the variety of species, ecosystems, and genetics—preserved in the national parks. For several years the Natural Resource Challenge has provided critical funding for nationally coordinated, systematic biological inventories of vascular plant and vertebrate animal species. These surveys are under way throughout the National Park System, and a few highlights are reported in this chapter. Adding to this emerging knowledge are independent park studies and the partnership-oriented All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, a model developed at Great Smoky Mountains National Park that is being replicated at other national parks. These scientific efforts are developing important, basic information for improved park management. The surveys being undertaken today throughout the National Park System are a good start, but eventually, comprehensive inventories of all life-forms will be necessary to gain a thorough understanding of how species interrelate and how they function in self-sustaining ecosystems. As the best examples of remnant ecosystems, national parks are particularly well suited to the scientific exploration of biodiversity. This role will only become more important in the future and is vital to park preservation today.